

Tab 1

Rebuilding efforts in Key were slow going and triaged to those who needed it more. To say that the devastation was demoralizing was an understatement, as since Skire had ascended, the whole world was feeling the squeeze of another catastrophic extinction level event.

Many of the survivors were claiming that the gods were trying to kill humans and nautipods specifically, and this tension manifested in an uptick in cultish behavior and overall apathetic responses to all forms of government, community, and individual survival.

It was common to see roving bands of religious zealots who were “trying to finish what Skire started”. It proved to be a catalyst in Idris’s increasing anxiety, as if there hadn’t been enough already. She was most concerned with keeping Embly safe, though she was also worried for Wrench, who had gone back to their home after her prosthetics had been repaired.

All humans needed their personal atmospheres at all times. Idris had heard that some humans could handle a few hours without it, but that wasn’t the norm, and until there was a breathable atmosphere again, most humans were essentially out of work and unable to move around as effectively.

It made them sitting ducks for bad faith actors.

Idris paced outside of the New Paths house. The fact that it managed to survive was impressive, as Idris could recall the state of the place when she had first moved in. It had never looked like the most stable place in the world.

It was made of old wood that had rot around the windows and doors, an uneven porch with a missing cover, and stairs that sagged to one side. A sag that had only been worsened by the ascent. All the windows were blown out from the final battle, and had dark blue trap squares covering them in a vain attempt to protect from the elements.

The siding was covered in cracks and displaced boards from the final onslaught, and the whole yard was in ruins. The gardens were still intact, but with the casters moving on, nothing had grown since the walls came down. All the land had been stripped bare, and was now just an extension of the devastation that had leveled the rest of the neighborhood.

The tent city was still in place, but most of it had been destroyed when the winds wiped most of it away. It was hard to see the streams of garbage where there had once been a city. The only other buildings that survived were far closer to the city center, and even then there wasn’t much still standing in one piece.

Part of Idris wondered if it was all worth it. She still felt the constant pull of [Unseen] to abandon what was left and return to her roots, killing and eating anything that approached her while she was hungry.

“Hey Idris,” Taiga said.

Idris started, ripped from her musings, **and smoothed her hands through the crackling plasma that made up half her face. It was hot and felt like shifting sand under her palm. It made a high pitched hissing and only stopped when Idris withdrew her hands again.** Taiga pinched a clipboard with her claws, and looked up at Idris with hardened eyes.

“Is it bad news?” Idris muttered, her fins flaring out.

“Suppose it depends on your definition of bad news,” Taiga said. “I just finished speaking with Ludus.”

“Is he okay?” Idris asked.

Taiga nodded. “He offered to help.”

Idris chuffed. Of course Ludus wanted to help. He was such a good boy, and always did the right thing to the best of his ability. The fact that he offered without them asking made her hearts swell with pride, and that was immediately swept aside in favor of being pragmatic.

Ludus did not have many skills that were useful for rebuilding a home. He was tech savvy for sure, but that did not lend itself well to house building. Not at this stage. And if the last of the casters were to be believed, the house had maybe a few months before it collapsed.

Which made sense to Idris. This place had been able to stand strong for over a hundred years, even with decades of neglect and patchwork repairs. Just as she felt like she was ready to collapse, she didn't blame the house for feeling the same way. It had served its purpose. All things eventually came to an end.

"I appreciate the sentiment," Idris said. "But I don't think Ludus's experience will be helpful here."

Taiga hummed. "Maybe not, but that wasn't what he offered." She paused, curling her stripped tendrils around her neck. The simple star and circle shapes flexed in thought. "He wants to surrender his accounts. All of them."

"We cannot take his money," Idris replied. "He might need it one day."

"Idris, need I remind you that he is a lifer?"

"He might not always be!" Idris spun around so she could be face to face with Taiga, her pacing finally ceased. Let it be known that surprise would always stop her in her mental ruts. "It does not feel right to take them. He worked hard for it."

"Yes, I covered this," Taiga said, unfazed. "I brought up just about everything that you could imagine. He was adamant. He was adamant even when his new friend told him to his face that he was being stupid on purpose."

Idris bristled. "It does not feel right to me."

Taiga sighed, mildly annoyed. "Idris, your whole operation is predicated on taking money from people and using it to make the world slightly better than it was before. We take money from rich idiots all the time. This one just doesn't want to have his name on a building, or want to be praised to the high heavens in the annual report. He doesn't want anything other than to help. Do you have any idea how rare that is?"

Idris's shoulders dropped. "I suppose you have a point."

"If we use his funds to rebuild, we can do so without having to bend to the wishes of those who want to brag about helping out the 'losers of society'. Can you imagine? Being able to actually spend it how you want? You have that opportunity right now, and it probably won't happen again."

"Is it even useful?" Idris replied. "The money. We have been doing fine without it. Surely they realized that we don't need money to live side by side. If everybody does their part."

Taiga shrugged. "Honestly, I don't know, and won't be able to tell you until we get internet access again. Most of what I hear is coming from Gravents, but it looks like that particular part of the old world will remain intact."

"Unfortunate."

"I agree," Taiga added hurriedly. "But we have a chance to get ahead of the curve at least a little bit. We can make a plan while knowing we have access to capital. The bank that the accounts are with are still functional, at least as long as we don't intend to withdraw it all in one go."

"If you will allow it, then let us use that to expand our scope. Ludus will be fine. He's resilient like that."

Idris took a few deep breaths. There was a lot to do. They needed a new house very soon, and if that meant that her younglings would be able to have a little bit of what they had before, then wasn't it her responsibility to provide that for them? She had ignored Skire's Second Calling in order to keep her younglings safe.

They deserved better. They deserved a solid foundation from which to flourish. Her lifers deserved better.

"Okay," Idris replied. "We will take it, but we will still do something for the lifers. So they will feel at home. Properly."

"I'll make it happen."